OSIWA’s work is driven by the vision, mission and values of creating an open society in West Africa – an environment where strong leaders and government institutions are accountable to their citizens, where natural resources are equitably distributed, and where human rights and rule of law prevail. Moving towards these goals, we are constantly evaluating and re-evaluating our work. Did we meet the goals we set out to achieve? What worked? What didn’t work? Where do we need to refocus? What lessons were learned? Ensuring our work has “impact” forms a buttress of how we monitor progress and evaluate successes.

At the beginning of every year, OSIWA takes a moment to step back and reflect on our work in the region over the preceding months. The work of grant-making and advocacy – especially in a region as diverse and dynamic as West Africa – is a constantly evolving endeavor. But even outside West Africa, knowing how to evaluate and what to evaluate are two key questions that have, for years, stirred debates within various circles of development actors.

In our area of work, “impact” is usually defined as the long-term effect brought on by one or more projects or activities. It’s seen as a change in behavior, habits or initial context and can vary in perception according to the various actors and their roles. We try to adopt this approach when we evaluate OSIWA’s work. When reviewing our partners’ projects, we try to look beyond the numbers; to see past the “checked” boxes. We are interested in knowing more than how many people participated in a rural sensitization workshop on gender rights, for example. We want to know how men and women are actually using this newly acquired knowledge – what actions indicate a socio-cultural evolution in women’s empowerment? Are more husbands allowing their wives to start their own business? Are more women seeking legal aid as a result of violence? Are more females running for parliament? These are some of the questions OSIWA looks to address when assessing the successes of our work.

We understand that for a project to achieve impact, it is not a singular or unified process. It is a multifarious endeavor with many different threads. Developing an effective strategy that negotiates the careful balance between ambition and realism is imperative. But the strategy must also define the area of intervention, including how, when and at what level to intervene. To prevent stasis, it must also work to create synergies between various actors. Clear communication from the onset is imperative.

In the following set of pages, we’ve put together a selection of over 25 OSIWA-supported projects that reflect how our partners go beyond merely achieving project results to actually “go the extra mile” towards achieving impact. And these lasting results – this “impact” – is often the type that is slowly, but surely changing lives. Some of our partners’ stories show more immediate and tangible outcomes, such as Mobility Foundation’s work on empowering leaders in Ghana, BudgIT’s money tracker in Nigeria or the training of Sahelien.com journalists in Mali and Niger. Others, such as the Human Rights Clinic at the Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, ONEF’s rights awareness project with women in Côte d’Ivoire or YUMA’s social reintegration work for previously incarcerated minors in Senegal, produce more subtle but often equally powerful effects over the longer-term.

It is our hope that this publication serves not only as a portrait of the types of work we support – giving some faces and names to the variety of partners we work with and the breadth of thematic areas in which we work. We also hope these reports, stories and firsthand accounts further incite conversation, inspire ideas and motivate new partnerships, so that together we can continue to work to achieve lasting and impactful results in a region so replete with dynamism, vitality and promise.
In Liberia, after decades of military rule, civil unrest and political instability, a lot of socio-political and economic changes have taken place, especially as it rebuilds and rehabilitates post-war institutions and frameworks. Today, like in many other parts of West Africa, Liberia is undergoing a constitutional review process. This is to help ensure its tenets meet its present day needs, post-conflict, and to solidify the rules for how Liberia should be governed in a contemporary context.

Seeing a prime opportunity for citizens’ involvement, the Liberia Media for Democratic Initiatives (LMDI), who champion themselves as mobilizers for grassroots voice and participation in national issues and decision-making processes, implemented two activities to engage the broader public in reviewing and informing on the constitutional review process. At the onset of the project, LMDI discovered that an estimated 98% of Liberians have never seen copies of the constitution, let alone read or talked about its various provisions. Their project was therefore not only necessary, but also the first project of its kind in the country. And the results have, so far, been noteworthy.

Six months before the Ebola outbreak, LMDI organized a series of forums that directly implicated over 10,000 people across 31 locations. At an indirect level, they involved more than a million people nationwide through the broadcasting of forums across 45 national and rural community radio and TV stations. Through these direct dialogue forums and community outreach, including the “Way to Peace” radio drama series interspersed with informative jingles, Liberians have had the opportunity to both speak and hear about polemic issues in the constitution and suggest possible ways forward. Previously taboo topics, such as citizenship, land and resource ownership, the tenures of elected officials and issues of decentralization were all broached and stimulated much debate – especially among rural populations.

“...“To say that we have no right to values under the land that we own is a denial of our God-given right. And so we have to change Article 22b that denies us all the resources on and under our land,” explains Robert Doe, a land-owner from Tuzon Town, Grand Gedeh County.

Peter Siawesome, from ITI, Rivercess County, talked about the importance of citizenship rights. “When non-negroes or white people are allowed to be citizens of our county, the kind of poverty in our country will make them buy all our land and we will become slaves to them. So we need our government to first empower us, then we can talk about opening up our citizenship (to outsiders).”

The topic of imposing term limits was also contentious. As Sakajebro Sieh explains, “Our Senators stay just too long in power and do very little for us. We have no way to get rid of them and so the review exercise will give us the opportunity to cut their time in power down. I mean, nine years is just too much for one person to hold on to power and do nothing for us.”

While the Ebola outbreak took a heavy toll on the country, the public consultations around the Constitutional Review Committee have resumed.
Jeune Cellule pour le Développement (JCD)

Empowering local mining communities in Guinea

If a country's wealth was measured by its natural resources, Guinea would be among the world's richest. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case. Though it holds a quarter of the global bauxite reserves – the ore used to produce aluminum metal and chemical products – and vast quantities of diamonds, gold and other precious minerals, Guinea hovers in the bottom ten countries on the Human Development Index (HDI). While the contribution of mining resources to the State budget is estimated at 30%, poverty (defined as those living off less than a dollar a day) continues to rise, affecting more than half the country's nearly 12 million people. Much of this is due to corruption, the poor management of resources by government officials and the lack of knowledge or understanding at the local level (including by elected representatives, women and youth).

Jeune Cellule pour le Développement (JCD), started by a group of Guinean students in 2006, has been working in the area of democratic governance and social justice. Over the years, they have collaborated with several partners, including the European Union (EU) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), to produce reports on the extractives industries, the state of civil society and challenges facing youth in Guinea. They have also trained youth and women on human rights issues.

In 2013, JCD launched a project aimed at sensitizing women and youth. They have currently paid nearly $200,000 USD. This money has been used to build schools, markets, health centers and renovate local council offices.

JCD’s work is also notable in how it complements the efforts of ADREMGUI, another key CSO in Guinea that focuses on improving governance and fiscal literacy in the country’s lower mining region. The two organizations have met to discuss how they can improve synergies.

Revenue Watch International (RWI)

Guiding Guinea’s mineral resource management

In 2007, Guinea marked its foray into the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI), the global standard that ensures transparency and accountability in the management of natural resources. However a year later, following the 2008 military coup, the country suspended its own membership, citing socio-political challenges that were impacting on the regular reporting of mineral sector payments and revenues.

Four years later, and nearly two years into President Alpha Conde’s leadership, Guinea once again rejoined the EITI, in July 2012. As a compliant country, Conde’s government must, among other aspects, produce annual EITI reports covering data from the previous year. This requires the active collaboration of key stakeholders, such as parliamentarians, civil society and the media, who all have important roles to play – particularly when it comes to ratifying and adopting laws, monitoring the execution of contracts or public action and communicating this information to the larger population. Unfortunately, one of the main problems is their lack of capacity. The extractive sector is a sensitive, technical, elitist and secretive arena where opacity and complexity abounds. It is hardly an area inviting of citizen participation, let alone facilitating clear or coherent understanding among primary stakeholders.

In 2011, Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI) then Revenue Watch International (RWI) began a project to help equip three main actors implicated in the management of Guinea’s mineral resource sector: parliamentarians (including the National Transitional Council), civil society (including Publish What You Pay-Guinea) and the media (both public and private radio, TV and print outlets). The media and parliamentarians were given practical training in Conakry, while CSOs participated in contract-monitoring sessions in Kindia. These workshops allowed participants to better understand otherwise elusive processes, such as how to analyze mining legislation on contracts; how to review decrees on implementing the Mining Code; effective ways of elaborating and disseminating EITI reports; and concrete ways to contribute to the drafting of decrees.

By targeting these three groups, the NRGI project took a multi-pronged approach to capacity building, ensuring understanding was not solely confined to one group. This also had a positive ripple effect in helping build synergies, trust and improved collaboration across these three sectors.

Aside from the training, a trio of NRGI guides were produced. With the civil society PWYP training specifically, practical workshops enabled them to play an active role in the elaboration and dissemination of the EITI reports that eventually contributed to Guinea’s 2014 EITI compliance status. These NRGI guides are currently used by researchers and students interested in Guinea’s mining sector. RWI has further proposed introducing the guide into Cameroon’s francophone regional summer school program.
In 1996, Senegal’s government proved its commitment to deepening the decentralization process by passing the 96–06 Law on March 22, 1996. This marked a laudable step forward in strengthening local governance process. In 2013, under the leadership of President Macky Sall, Senegal went one step further by launching another set of decentralization reforms known as “Act III”. This Act would, among other aspects, harmonize communalization, help rebalance powers between local authorities, promote local development by territories, promote regional economic dynamics, increase citizens’ participation in governance issues and help redefine the administrative boards across Senegal’s 14 regions.

While less overtly visible in the same ways as economic or electoral reforms, decentralizing powers from one branch of government has profound and varied impacts on the entire social, political and economic landscape of a country. But maximizing full benefit from a decentralized legislative process can also be a long and complicated process. There are varying technical, administrative, fiscal and political facets to consider. To achieve more democratic and accountable management of local resources and services, local authorities and citizens must have the capacity and skills to effectively manage their new self-governing obligations.

In 2014, the Collectif des Organisations de la Societe Civile du Senegal pour les Elections (COSCE), working under the NGO 3D, embarked on a one-year project set to reinforce local good governance practices. They implicated civil society and local citizens in ongoing policy and institutional reforms taking place in their respective departments and constituencies. COSCE organized a national consultation with relevant CSOs working on political governance and decentralization to include their contributions to the reform process. A recommendation document was produced and shared with the reform committee and an advocacy and media campaign was conducted to ensure effective implementation.

To help create an environment conducive to dialogue and citizen’s participation in decision-making, COSCE organized three main activities over the course of the year. These included lobbying and institutional reform projects with civil society in the form of a shared “collective agenda”, which was translated into local languages; the publication of an illustrated guide to promote and disseminate the ongoing decentralization of Act III reform; and the contribution towards capacity building of locally elected officials.

This multi-pronged approach allowed COSCE to reach several groups of people simultaneously and encourage their contribution in the local governance reform process, which is still on-going today. This project has been noteworthy in the way it has harmonized and transmitted the reform committee’s recommendations into the new decentralization code and produced simplified guides for newly elected local authorities.
Mapping & fund tracking of flood relief and rehabilitation in Nigeria

In 2012, after devastating floods swept through 27 of Nigeria’s 36 states, over 300 lives were lost and over two million people displaced. The floods destroyed farmlands, livestock and other means of livelihood. The government’s inability to prevent the flooding, and their poor management post-disaster has remained a source of concern for many Nigerians. Their lack and inefficient response indicates that neither the federal, state or local governments had or have clear disaster plans in place to deal with crises of such magnitude. Temporary camps, a national emergency fund campaign and private sector groups were all set up to raise support funds. But the insufficiency of relief materials and the inadequacy of accommodation facilities, coupled with incidences of security infractions and criminal attacks in the camps, all compromised efforts to help the flood victims.

One of the key recurring concerns has been the lack of transparency and accountability in the use of the government’s allocated relief funds given to affected states post-floods. In October 2012, over three months after the floods began, President Goodluck Jonathan released N17.6 billion ($109.1 million USD) – all “category A” states were intended to receive N500 million each, “category B” states N400 million, “category C” states N300 million and “category D” states N250 million. While there is a website (www.nigeriafloodrelief.org) developed by the relief committee, there is virtually no information showing how the funds have been used. In response to the opacity surrounding the use of money, the Citizen Budget Information Technology Network (commonly known as BudgIT) embarked on a yearlong project to monitor the use of funds allocated and raised under the Flood Relief and Rehabilitation Program (initiated by the Federal government). The project worked with affected communities to help citizens learn more about how much was raised from donations and government funding, how these funds were disbursed and how much was actually received by flood victims.

The personal stories of directly affected individuals highlighted the poor management of relief programs across many states, as well as the pittances that were paid to persons who had lost their homes and means of livelihoods. These stories were widely broadcasted on social media and the project’s website portal, and further published in ‘Flood Relief and Rehabilitation Funds - A Case For Accountability’. This report has helped raise wider public awareness on the issue. Perhaps one of the most remarkable features of this project is the innovative use of an info-technology powered platform (www.floodmoney.org). This tool allows citizens - and especially those from flood affected communities - to tell their own experiences and interact with targeted state relief and rehabilitation committees.

As a result of this project (and following the launch of the report), concerned government agencies have sought closer interactions with BudgIT on key recommendations. Specifically, the Office of the Auditor General of the Federation (OAGF) has established the Committee-Audit of 2012 Flood Disaster Related Aid. This group is auditing the relief funds processed and raised through the Aliko Dangote-led Presidential Committee on Flood Relief and Rehabilitation. The OAGF Audit committee is liaising closely with BudgIT and will rely on the personal stories of those affected (and other research findings from the BudgIT report) in the course of its work. The Audit Committee’s work is expected to last between 6 and 9 months.

The OAGF project’s report revealed that despite the state governors’ acknowledgement that they received monies and distributed it to flood victims, the funds remained unaccounted for. When victims did receive funds, it was late and uncoordinated. The report further revealed that states where camps were managed by private organizations were better run than those managed by the government. Equally disturbing, the report indicates that relief materials, such as medical supplies meant for victims, were reportedly embezzled by middlemen. Affected persons had other levels of complaints relating to the insensitivity of government despite the non-provision of relief for affected persons. In Abia State for instance, a resident named Kalu Uke testified in the course of interactions with BudgIT in January 2014 that despite not receiving anything from the government, he was still expected to pay a government imposed infrastructural development levy of N7000 ($35USD).

BudgIT’s project engagement with the OAGF, and specifically the Committee-Audit of 2012 Flood Disaster Related Aid, will potentially impact how relief funds are used in the country. This is also the first time that the OAGF is embarking on the audit of emergency relief funds (in this case for flood relief) released, raised and managed by the Federal Government and the Presidential Flood Relief and Rehabilitation Committee.
Embracing people-driven change in Nigeria

Since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, the country's civil society has been growing at impressive rates. They play a strong role in a range of key governance challenges, chief among them is fighting corruption and impunity. Their level of active engagement was prominently demonstrated in January 2012 during the infamous fuel subsidy removal protests. The nationwide event was incited by Nigeria's civil society, and fervent campaigns took place attracting millions to the street and eventually leading to the government's reversal of the earlier announced increased fuel price.

Over a year after these January 2012 protests, the fight against depravity – especially in the oil and gas sector – has not yielded the desired results. To date, the nation's energy company (NNPC) has failed to demonstrate its alleged complicity in defrauding the country. The Presidency has also failed to demonstrate a readiness to confront the issue of high level corruption by government and elected officials.

In the spring of 2013, a platform of Nigerian activists formed the Say No Campaign, a committee dedicated to fight corruption, impunity, poverty, violence and other governance challenges in Nigeria. They push for administrative, legal, policy and legislative changes that will improve the democratic landscape of their country, and they do so by organizing national and sub-national campaigns, press conferences, advocacy engagements, media campaigns and even street protests.

That same year, Say No Campaign embarked on a 15 month campaign aimed at mobilizing Nigerians nationwide to embrace people-driven and non-violent forms of crusades and protests. This is no easy task in a nation of over 173 million people.

Since it began, the Say No Campaign is slowly, but surely meeting its goals. They have various projects, key of which is the setting up of mobilization hubs in four geo-political zones (South-East, North-Central, North-West and South-West). These hubs have attracted a high level of citizen engagement, particularly around campaigns such as those calling for the resignation of the Minister of Interior over the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIMS) recruitment scandal that led to the deaths of many unemployed youths across the country. Similarly, there were widespread calls for the removal of the (now former) Minister of Aviation over her alleged involvement in corrupt practices. Both actions demonstrate how concerted citizen effort to exert pressure in non-violent ways can positively impact government response.

Aside from having the full support of a majority of Nigerians, the Say No Campaign also works with credible and high-profile institutions, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and uses both traditional and new media to increase citizen awareness and interest in their campaign themes.

Say No Campaign

With the discovery of oil in Ghana in 2007, citizens expected this to be a significant moment that would propel the country forward and push it into middle-income developing status. But as exemplified time and again across countless resource-rich nations, the discovery of natural wealth often, in a twist of ironic fate, forecasts tougher times ahead, not economic boon.

The resource curse – where countries abounding with natural wealth are more prone to high poverty levels, less diversified economies and are overall more fragile than they would otherwise be – is well-known in West Africa. In Ghana’s case, the increase in commercial oil production (which netted the state $1.3bn between 2011 and 2013) has been accompanied by numerous documented cases of poor governance, in revenue generation and expenditure, as well as outright corruption.

The African Center for Energy Policy (ACEP, www.acepghana.com) a relatively new Think Tank focusing on the governance of the energy sector in Ghana, has been thoroughly engaged since 2013 in the drafting of a new Petroleum Bill to repeal the old PNDC Law 84, which has governed the oil and gas sector since 1984. The new Bill looks to address a number of deficiencies in the previous one. Most notably, it seeks to ensure key transparency and accountability terms, open contracting processes, beneficial ownership disclosure, environmental accountability and protection, review of discretionary powers by certain government institutions, and improved fiscal rates and terms.

ACEP has been working with relevant stakeholders, including parliament, the Ministry of Petroleum (formerly the Ministry of Energy), civil society organizations, traditional leaders, the media, youth, religious bodies and the diplomatic community to sensitize on the Bills’ deficiencies before it is passed into law. These engagements were preceded by a comprehensive analysis of the new Bill, drawing on best global practices. ACEP also presented the challenges with the Bill to the diplomatic community, namely ambassadors, in the process of communicating their support of open contracting to the president.

Additionally, ACEP is tackling another key problem in Ghana’s oil and gas sector: corruption. They are working to reduce incentives and increase the punitive cost for perpetrators. They are increasing the reporting on oil and gas related corruption, building the capacity of anti-corruption institutions (to identify, investigate and prosecute corruption cases in the oil and gas industry) and campaigning for framework conditions that promote anti-corruption in the oil and gas industry.

There is great potential for Ghana’s oil and gas industry to drive the economy in a positive way. But this will only happen if this emerging industry is fully integrated into the local economy and the menace of corruption vigorously and holistically tackled along the entire value chain with greater emphasis on revenue generation, revenue management and efficient institutional development to monitor the industry.

African Center for Energy Policy (ACEP)

Ensuring oil & gas benefit Ghanaians, today & tomorrow

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Improving access to Liberia’s criminal justice system for its citizens is a necessary part of the country’s post-conflict rebuilding process. Facilitating and enhancing peoples’ relations with the courts, national police and bureau of corrections can directly impact on the everyday safety, economy and overall quality of life for Liberians. Since the end of its 14-year civil war, Liberia’s judicial system has suffered tremendous setbacks. This has manifested through a lack of coordination among justice officials, little or no record-keeping of trials, unduly lengthy trial processes and overburdened pre-trial detentions. This has had profound effects on the lives of Liberians, a vast majority of whom are not aware of their own rights, let alone miscarriages of justice, bribery or unlawful imprisonment. As a result, many Liberians (and especially the more vulnerable and marginalized sections of the population) feel disfranchised, powerless and frustrated. The lack of citizen understanding, coupled with the overall failings of the justice system and the lingering chasm between people and justice, mean the return to lawlessness remains a persist threat in Liberia.

Compassion Fund-Liberia (COFUL), a Monrovia-based nonprofit, are active players in the area of human rights awareness and judicial reconstruction in the country. Seeing the gap between citizen’s participation and a strong and healthy justice system, COFUL set out to engage Liberians across three of its 15 counties. They worked in Bomi, which is the poorest county and subject to gross miscarriages of justice; Montserrado, which holds over 50% of the country’s pre-trial detainees; and Margibi, where the rate of pre-trial detainees is actually decreasing. This pilot project was designed to build local community capacity in understanding grassroots advocacy and the entire judicial process.

In doing so, COFUL initiated a program known as “Bringing the Court to the People”. The project ran mock trials in local communities, following appropriate courtroom procedures, which was aimed at both educating the public on proper judicial procedures and helping restore public confidence in the process itself. Other activities implemented include creating court monitoring and advocacy committees and providing legal aid services. Ten committees were created across the three counties of focus where they reported on courtroom procedures and provided feedback to COFUL social workers. Legal services - ranging from counseling, referrals and even representation - helped vulnerable girls and women who were subject to abuse in gaining access to justice. It also helped develop a database of cases reported, which at upwards of 1600 helps track the effectiveness of justice mechanisms. The types of cases reported include criminal acts such as property theft, murder, armed robbery and aggravated assault, as well as civil cases such as menacing and trespass, disorderly conduct and assault.

T. Samson Murphy is a social worker who leads the Margibi Youth United for Generational Change. He explains how the level of understanding on justice issues has improved since the COFUL project:

“The more you monitor people, the more they’ll get serious about their job. There is a lot of efficiency and proficiency coming from the courts now unlike before. Now there is a significant reduction in mob violence; citizens are taking their cases to the police, cognizant that they will be forwarded to the court; citizens are also more confident in the courts when they know they are being monitored; and now more people are taking their court-related cases to the police stations… But the question is now, what about the people who live in remote parts of the country? There is a need to expand activities into these areas.”

Sketch of “Know your rights” at Flomo Theatre in Liberia.
Rebuilding an entire country after years of civil war takes time. Nowhere is this truer than in Liberia where, after 14 years of violence, this nation of some four million was then hit by Ebola, which took some 3,800 lives by February 2015. The condition of the country’s social services, including their education, health and justice sectors, remain in a fragile state and will continue to lag far behind much of the continent for some time to come.

This situation poses particularly dire consequences to Liberia’s most vulnerable population – its children – who require extra care in their social and educational development.

Aside from being continually subject to labor, abuse and trafficking, UNICEF estimates that half a million children in Liberia are not enrolled in school, and over two thirds of those children enrolled are not actually taught by qualified teachers. Guaranteeing the future development of Liberia hinges on the proper growth and improvement of its youth. To address the particular challenges facing Liberia’s children, Child Steps International Liberia (CSIL) set up offices in March 2013. Nearly a year later they launched a creative initiative known as the “LAW+YOU” project.

The goal is to give young students the tools to access Liberia’s justice system, to know their rights and to actively participate in the civic arena. These are all aspects otherwise overlooked by Liberia’s general population, let alone its youth.

The “LAW+YOU” program, which was approved by the Liberian Ministry of Education, began with a teacher training project that coached 20 instructors from six schools in interactive teaching techniques and provided a thorough review of a curriculum entitled “LAW+YOU: Rights & Responsibilities of the Liberian Citizen.”

Six schools in Monrovia participated in this pilot round and some 1,500 students from the sixth, ninth and eleventh grades studied diverse and interrelated topics, such as how to make positive changes in their country, the importance of a free and responsible press, how corruption affects society and the rights of citizens. The project was well received by both the students and teachers, and they hope to restart another roll-out project.

Torsue F. Ballah is a ninth-grade instructor at Newport Junior High School in Monrovia. He has 55 students in his class and used the Law + YOU project this past year: “The project was so unique for the students, and they obviously enjoyed it as they were actively participating and asking lots of questions. They also expressed interest that it continues so they can stay informed about Liberia’s law and constitution. They requested more classes, and extended classroom discussions have already been taking place in a majority of the schools.”

“A project evaluation was carried out to assess the curriculum. It is hoped that once released, this report will roll out across every school in Liberia and enable each and every student the opportunity to learn about their civic rights and gain access to justice.”

“The only additions to the curriculum that I would suggest is something on good citizenship, voting, presidential appointment, war, peace, humanitarian law and diplomacy. This project is really helping Liberians defend their rights and responsibilities as citizens and making them aware of the three branches of the Liberian government.”

Child Steps International Liberia (CSIL)  Ensuring justice among Liberia’s youth
Empowering Ghana’s traditional leaders to defend the rights of their communities

Knowledge is a key part in ensuring the success of most endeavors and is especially critical when it comes to inclusive development. A prime example is in Ghana with the case of its traditional leaders. The role of rulers has been evolving over the years alongside the country’s own democratic development. The country’s 1992 constitution recognizes and protects traditional rulers as a dual mode of leadership running parallel to the modern democratic state system. But while traditional leadership recognizes and guarantees the existence of democratic institutions, such as legislature and parliament, they are not allowed to play an active role in party politics or directly involve themselves in these institutions.

But this does not mean the role of traditional leaders is fading. On the contrary, they still play a key part in the design and implementation of development projects in their specific areas of jurisdiction. However, the problem is these traditional leaders often do not have the necessary knowledge or skill level to effectively perform their roles during the designing, planning of policies or plans and developmental projects.

To resolve this issue, Mobility Foundation started a two-year project in two districts in Northern Ghana. The goal was to raise awareness and empower traditional leaders at the community level with relevant “tailor-made” educational training, especially as it related to their rights (as enshrined in the Constitution) and to improve active and meaningful participation in policy and developmental programs at both the community and district levels. This initiative also sought to improve transparency and accountability in the area of service delivery.

This project was carried out using innovative methodologies, such as community meetings and conversations, durbars (court of traditional leaders), information forums, public development programs and community/district assembly open houses.

Healthcare for all Senegalese

In Senegal, there are a wide range of social security services and programs that, theoretically, target everyone, including the poorest and most vulnerable. But the reality is quite different. Access to adequate health care remains limited, with only an estimated 20% of Senegal’s 12 million people receiving care. In 2009, a National Plan of Health and Social Development was put in place to cover a 10-year period (up to 2018) that would help guide health policies. In 2012, the government committed to setting up free universal health coverage (CMU), designed to guarantee health care to all citizens regardless of social status, income level, residence or gender. The plan has been stymied, however, allegedly due to lack of funds available to subsidize hospital costs and a host of other challenges, including lack of political communication.

In June 2013, the Pan African Institute for Consumer, Citizenship and Development (CICODEV), a Dakar-based human rights organization with a lengthy and notable track-record of mobilizing citizens and defending human rights, embarked on a project to ensure vulnerable populations – and particularly women and children in both urban and rural settings – have access to adequate healthcare services. They set out to work with the government and citizens to popularize the central idea behind the CMU. They used activities such as debates, information and public education sessions and film screenings. They also set up local health system observers in nine of Senegal’s 14 districts to help assess the efficiency, challenges and overall functioning of the CMU services.

The results of CICODEV’s efforts are promising. Sensitization and monitoring activities have helped build an active citizenry, engaged in ensuring CMU accountability in their promises for free health care, among women and children specifically. There have also been consistent lobbying and advocacy efforts with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health, parliamentarians, insurance companies and health workers, helping keep the government true to their word. A third, and final key achievement of this project has been its instrumental help in drafting a Universal Medical Coverage Bill, allowing for increased budget allocations to the national health sector from 10% to 15%.

Seidu Amina, a beneficiary of the Mobility Foundation project, shares her story

Seidu Amina, a beneficiary of the Mobility Foundation project, shares her story.

My name is Seidu Amina and I am from the Bincharantaga community. I have six children, two boys and four girls. My youngest is four years old. Initially we were not registered in the National Health Insurance Scheme, not because we didn’t want to be, but because travelling from Bincharantaga to Bimbilla (the District Capital) to register myself and my children was a problem. I didn’t have enough money to take a car, which cost us GH¢50.00 ($8.60 USD), or to even pay the additional cost to register myself and the children. But with the help of the Mobility Foundation project, my community Chief and the other elders in my village were able to lobby District Assembly and District Health Insurance schemes to put up a sub-station office at Bincharantaga to register new members and renew cards. With this new development, I registered myself and my children. Four months later, my fourth child felt sick and we had to rush her to Yendi Hospital. We spent 20 days at the hospital and didn’t need to pay anything. In the hospital, I thanked God and was grateful for this project because it has allowed my husband and I to avoid begging or selling food in the street just to make that extra money to pay for the hospital costs.

Thank you for the brilliant thinking and support to my family, because without this initiative my daughter would have died. We could never have afforded to pay for all this.
Since the end of Sierra Leone’s 11-year civil war in 2002, the country has gradually improved on its human rights record. But there is still a long way to go. Sierra Leone is steadily putting in place the legal framework and civic education to help build a foundation for rights defense. And there’s no better place to begin this process than in the university system.

In 2001, the Fourah Bay College Human Rights Clinic was established in Freetown to help promote clinical legal education. They set up a Clinical Legal Education program that today, over 13 years later, is still going strong.

It runs five projects, including the Legal Aid Project (LAP), Human Rights On Campus (H-ROC), the Schools Education Project (SEP), the Summer Internship Project and the Newsletter Project. Each has its own specific objectives, but all share the same overarching goal to help provide practical training in the areas of human rights, legal aid and social justice systems.

The Legal Aid Project is an initiative to train and engage students in legal aid work and to foster interest in community service. They do so by providing much-needed (and free) justice services. Since January 2014, the 12 students working on the Legal Aid project have been working with Timap for Justice (TFJ), the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL), the Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International, among others. At CARL, for example, the students observe court proceedings and report their findings in local newspapers and online. In some cases, the students monitor particular cases to see how they progress in court. In many instances, their findings revealed that most cases are delayed due to lack of evidence against the accused; jurors, prosecutors and magistrates not attending court sittings; or a lack of witnesses on the stand. Some observed cases were discharged simply due to the frequency of delays.

The Schools Education Project is an outreach initiative that brings human rights education and human rights values directly into secondary schools. This is a valuable project, because there is normally no provision for human rights education in the curriculum. So far, the project has reached an average of 11 students per school. The pupils have formed human rights clubs, and in all six selected schools this has become the club the vast majority of students choose to join. It is hoped that by the time these pupils enter university their minds will have been prepared for human rights work.

The Summer Internship Project was initiated as a way to engage clinic members in practical human rights work and help indigent clients who are otherwise not able to take full advantage, or perhaps even gain access to the justice system. Interns at AdvocAid, for example, monitored the condition of female detainees at the central prisons by accompanying the AdvocAid staff.

The students would compile their findings and report back to the organization. In turn, the organization would then inform and engage with the Ministry of Internal Affairs for appropriate action to be taken on behalf of the prisoners and detainees. They also helped review cases of female prisoners and detainees, and helped (when necessary) in the release of prisoners who had been held in detention as a result of the judiciary’s lack of capacity to fast-track trials.
WOMEN’S RIGHTS

CHAPTER III

During the postwar rebuilding and reconciliation efforts of many countries, affirmative action policies are put in place to help ensure minority groups, such as women, are adequately accounted for and represented in political and public affairs.

In Sierra Leone’s case, however, such gender-equality measures were largely resisted until eight years after the end of their civil war. There were some policy initiatives that actively tried to improve women’s empowerment within the country’s local and national government structures – notably during the 2000-2004 period - but it was not until 2010 that (then) President Ernest Koroma finally acquiesced to demands for 30% female representation in politics and promised it would be included in the following electoral cycle (2012-2017).

Today, nearly five years later, women’s role and representation in the political arena is still far from reaching its desired goal. Among other factors, this is largely a result of entrenched cultural and traditional belief systems and practices, coupled with the limited political will to transform the role and position of women in Sierra Leone.

Consequently, there is still much work to do in engaging the state and political actors to effectively address the needs gaps in the promotion of women’s participation at the district and community governance levels.

Action Plus, an organization working to support the welfare of poor and vulnerable groups and communities, embarked on an 18-month project to support a broad range of women leaders – from elected representatives, activists, gender experts and CSOs – to engage with the government on the development of gender-sensitive policies.

They set out three broad activities, including six quarterly reviews, formulation and advocacy sessions with community actors and policy makers to develop practical recommendations on issues such as inheritance, succession, sexual and gender-based violence and property rights.

Three workshops with 50 elected women leaders (including women parliamentarians, counselors, members of chiefdom, ward and village development committees and women’s group leaders) helped train on the core functions of parliament and local council in Kenema and Kailahun districts. Three other seminars targeting 60 decision-makers were used to enhance public awareness on gender issues and improve communication and leadership skills.

Doris E. Kalil is Regional Coordinator for the Women’s Forum in the Eastern Region:

“The training has increased my knowledge and capacity on issues of communication, advocacy and leadership. As head of Women’s Forum in the Eastern Province, I am using these skills to promote the interest and welfare of women in governance and protect them from violence. Furthermore, the knowledge acquired from the training has been passed on to other women and has helped me sensitize them on their rights, roles and responsibilities in the governance of their communities. During the Ebola outbreak, we went round communities in Kenema sensitizing people on best health practices and acceptance of survivors.”

In any country, it is difficult to incorporate gender and women’s rights values into governance structures through policy change. In a country such as Sierra Leone, which remains largely patriarchal in most areas and is compounded by widespread poverty, this task becomes even more challenging. There are several other factors to consider, namely the risk that mere lip service would be paid to such initiatives or that resistance would be felt by political and traditional authorities.

Action Plus ensures that men at the district and community levels continue to play a central role in the design and implementation of project activities. They engage community structures to make commitments followed by concrete and regular monitoring actions to facilitate women’s participation in the projects, as well as community-level engagement and processes.
Violence against women remains a serious problem in Guinea affecting an estimated 80% of the female population. It is also a highly sensitive topic – a cultural taboo to discuss – which means it is often overlooked or ignored both publicly and privately. For a country that witnessed an atrocity of unprecedented scale during the September 2009 massacre, during which at least 150 people were murdered by the presidential guard and scores of women were raped and sexually abused, the issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a grave matter that persists often without redress.

Guinea has several legal and institutional instruments in place to defend the rights of women, including being signatory to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Children. Nevertheless, the lack of awareness and understanding of SGBV coupled with deeply engrained socio-cultural norms and impunity mean it is both widespread and difficult to counter.

In January 2010, a national strategy against SGBV was adopted. This came on the heels of a country-wide study conducted the year before that revealed that an estimated 86-93% of women in Guinea experience some form of violence. In reaction to these alarming numbers, Alliance des Femmes pour l’Egalite et le Genre en Guinee (AFEGGUI), began sensitization campaigns to increase women’s awareness of their rights.

In 2013, they began a year-long project to promote and protect the rights of women in the regions of Mamou and Labe, where the prevalence of SGBV is the highest. They created a booklet on the legal provisions against SGBV and presented these in the form of training sessions targeting the primary “awareness-raising agents”: women.

They also opened two information centers to provide counselling and legal assistance, which are run by women beneficiaries of AFEGGUI’s sensitization training.

One of the key results of these efforts has been the empowerment of women to actively seek support and justice. In both Mamou and Labe, individual women have come forward to seek judicial and medical help that led to legal action against their perpetrators. This in itself marks a notable step forward, as prior to this program it was essentially unheard of for victims of violence to speak out in Guinea.
Côte d’Ivoire, as in a majority of West African countries, has all the legal tools in place to guarantee the principles of equality and non-discrimination between men and women. Gender rights are safeguarded by the Constitution, which states that “All human beings are born free and equal before the law. They enjoy the right to life, to liberty, to the development of their personality and respect for their dignity. These rights are inviolable.” But having the legal frameworks in place and ensuring they are respected in everyday life are two different aspects. Unfortunately, in the case of Côte d’Ivoire, a large proportion of women (and especially those living in rural parts in the north and west of the country) are subject to all kinds of abuse. This ranges from female genital cutting (FGC), early and forced marriage, and physical and verbal violence – all of which are backed by traditional beliefs that position women as subordinate to men. These women may be subject to the will of their husbands, or any man for that matter.

In 2013, l’organisation nationale pour l’enfant, la femme et la famille (ONEF) launched a two-year project targeting 47 villages in the Mankono department in the Midwest region of the country. This area was selected after a 2009 ONEF study determined that women in this area were particularly lacking in rights awareness and promotion. ONEF’s project put in place literacy, outreach and advocacy activities targeting men, women, traditional leaders and local authorities to help educate on women’s rights and child (girls’) protection.

Four women who participate in the ONEF project share their own stories:

**Tiene Magai**
My life is better today thanks to the ONEF project, because I got to keep what was left to me in my late husband’s will. My name is Tiene Magai, and I’m from Kamoro village in the prefecture of Bouandougou.

In 2003, when my husband died, this happened to coincide with a mass awareness campaign in our local village on the topic of women’s rights and inheritance. This awareness-building workshop prompted my late husband’s parents to agree to leave me a hectare of his cashew field. Today I’ve remarried in another village, Guesso Bonosso (Bouandougou), and I continue to reap the benefits of what I’ve inherited. This would have been impossible before the project.

**Fatoumata Kamagate**
My name is Mrs. Fatoumata Kamagate, I live in Bouandougou in the department of Mankono. I had always hoped to work in small business, but my husband forbade me, saying that my place is at home and to take care of the family.

But now my life has changed thanks to the project of ONEF. My husband allowed me to fulfill my dream and even gave me 100,000 CFA ($200 USD) after he sold his cashew farm in March 2014. I sell attié, the local Ivorian grain. I am very fulfilled and will never cease to thank ONEF enough for helping me.

**Nakissi Kande**
My name is Nakissi Kande and I am President of the Village Women of Ouedallah, a sub-prefecture of Tiéningboué. At my old age (of 62), the ONEF project helped me realize one of my wishes, which is to learn how to write my name.

I thank them with all my heart because through literacy I know how to read and write my name, I can dial phone numbers and I no longer need my children to help me. In addition, it allows me to call them to get news when they are too busy to come visit. Again, thank you.

**Assita Céd**
I’m Assita, a student in the second level of High School in Tiéningboué. I am 17 years old and my parents wanted to give me away in marriage, which meant I had to stop studying. But now, thanks to this project my father gave up this idea, and I continue to go to school. I am very happy because I intend to do a lot of schooling.
Côte d’Ivoire’s decade long socio-political crisis plunged the country into a brutal conflict that had particularly nefarious effects on women. Gender-based violence, in any form, is an infringement on human rights, and the protection of its victims, mainly women and children, requires strong response systems and processes. Today, in post conflict Côte d’Ivoire, sexual violence and other rights violations continue to be a prevalent issue.

Strengthening justice mechanisms, empowerment initiatives and retribution for survivors are all part of campaigns and educate the public, provide legal aid assistance, open a new clinic in Abobo and develop an Ivorian-specific paralegal training manual.

As a battered woman myself and a victim of sexual violence, in any form, I was able to assert my rights to my landlord. When I presented him with my own paralegal status and a copy of the text of legislation on my lease, I had access to my rights for him to assume financial responsibility by granting alimony.

On a personal level, this project has helped me a lot – first, by allowing me to gain legal knowledge and second, motivating me to continue my studies directly for helping them better understand their options and the legal implications.

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Edith Kouame
My name is Edith Kouame. I live in commonlaw with my partner and am a mother of two. I am a paralegal and was an actress in a theatre group that did public awareness campaigns with AFJCI. I played several roles – even when I was sick – and found it so gratifying. I saw the profound effect we were having on the public – they got very emotional after our sketches, which made it the right time to bring them into the issues of violence against women at much greater depth.

As an actress, the first time I played with the cast it was in the role of a widow whose in-laws took all the property left to her by her late-husband. We were all so surprised at the end to see that women in the audience had tears in their eyes. Many were remembering painful memories of when their own husbands died. These are the moments that make it so rewarding – people congratulating us afterwards and agreeing to break their own silences by going to see the women lawyers association. This project allowed me to grow in maturity and it opened my mind. I was able to assert my rights to my landlord. When I presented him with my own paralegal status and a copy of the text of legislation on my lease, I had peace since that day I assure you.

As a battered woman myself and a victim of all kinds of violence, the father of my children finally became aware of the evil he was putting me through and pulled himself together. Since December 25, 2013 I have not suffered a single beating from him. We are trying as much as possible to save our relationship for the good of our children. I was also able to convince my cousin to go to the legal clinic to seek advice. She got pregnant from a Lebanese man who refused to recognize the child. With the advice of the clinic, she was able to assert her rights for him to assume financial responsibility by granting alimony.

Delphine Dago
My name is Delphine Dago. I am the wife of Tanoh and a mother of three. We live in Abobo where I work as a paralegal, helping sensitize the public. I especially like doing awareness-building, going door-to-door. Today, in post conflict Côte d’Ivoire, sexual violence and other rights violations continue to be a prevalent issue.

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Senegal’s 2014 penitentiary administration annual report estimates that 4.95% of their prison population is under the age of 18. But according to police and gendarmerie reports, this number is actually much greater. There are several reasons for under-reporting, including the avoidance of closer scrutiny and critique of policies and practices that may undermine the rehabilitative intent of prison, as well as the systematic abuses of human rights that often take place behind prison walls. There is also another and perhaps less obvious factor involved: youth in Senegal face heavy social stigma and criticism, including by friends and family, once released. While Senegal’s judicial system is comparatively more advanced than in other countries in the region, there is still a tendency to assume a punitive rather than rehabilitative approach to incarceration. This means that, more often than not, convicts do not learn the necessary career or life-learning skills when they are in prison. This makes it all the more difficult to reintegrate and forge social ties once released.

In 2006, the Youth Urban Media Academy (YUMA), an association founded by well-known local rap artist “Matador”, was created in response to a flood that left thousands of people homeless on the outskirts of Dakar. They soon grew into a multifarious organization committed to fostering youth engagement across Senegal’s socio-political life, including working with young offenders.

In March 2014, after having already worked with the Ministry of Justice, YUMA embarked on a year-long pilot project targeting former youth detainees. They began offering courses to nine young male participants in filmmaking, photography, languages (English and French), and career and lifestyle counselling. The program included four sessions per week over a period of six months. The idea was to allow these former detainees to “tell their own stories”, empowering them to share in creative and informal ways on topics relating to human rights, prison reform and other social justice issues.

At the end of this project, in October 2014, the nine participants screened their short documentary films at a public gathering in Dakar, followed by vibrant discussions on poverty, unemployment, child begging and street hustling. The young men were given the platform to explain to the audience, which included their own mothers, their motivations, desires and future plans. For many, it left them feeling empowered and supported.

One participant said: “The project allowed us to find ourselves again and gives us courage to succeed.”

“I feel so proud!” said one of the YUMA instructors. “These guys are now able to use their skills to build new images of themselves.”

To ensure the sustainability of this project, YUMA intends to set up a mentorship program so these skills will be passed on within the community.
Standing up for disability rights in Sierra Leone

There are approximately 180-220 million youth living with disabilities around the world. In Sierra Leone, while there is a lack of specific or in-depth statistical data, the UN estimates there are at least half a million people living with disabilities—some a result of atrocities committed during their civil war, others due to birth defects or accidents. Among the youth population specifically, some estimate it could comprise as much as 34% of the youth demographic. What is certain is that in Sierra Leone, as across much of Africa, persons living with disabilities face enormous challenges and discrimination.

Aside from the practical issues such as higher costs for medical care, compromised access to a majority of public and private spaces and higher rates of unemployment, persons living with disabilities are subject to heavy social stigma. As such, their voices are often silenced and they hold little, if any, political or social position that would allow their opinions to be heard. While Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in May 2009 and introduced the Persons with Disability Act in 2011 to address their particular human rights concerns, more still needs to be done to defend their needs and interests.

Development planning, programming for the inclusion of persons with disabilities and implementation of laws that protect persons with disabilities, for example, have large gaps that have inadvertently mitigated against the full participation of youth with disabilities. As a result, this group has become further disenfranchised and continues to be at risk for other serious health issues, such as HIV and AIDS.

In 2011, the African Youth with Disabilities Network (AYWDN) was created as a pan-African organization committed to uniting and empowering the disabled youth community across the continent. They work by influencing regional policies and programs that address the specific challenges faced by this group.

The local coalition of AYWDN-Sierra Leone launched in 2012, and a year later, embarked on a project set to institutionalize the branch and actualize the implementation of both the CRPD and Persons with Disability Act. They did so by setting up a National Steering Committee that advocates and engages stakeholders in various parts of the country for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in decision making processes. They also engaged in media campaigns to ensure greater visibility of their actions, including through the printing of banners and t-shirts carrying messages of non-discrimination and inclusion. And thirdly, they carried out capacity building workshops for five AYWDN staff and 40 network members. This project has been successful in building a cadre of dynamic disabled youth activists who are actively engaged in advocacy issues affecting them.

Sahr Samuel Sorie is a Steering Committee Member from Kono who now works as Chairman for Operation Clean the City-Kono: “At first I was a bit hesitant to join. Little did I realize the dramatic changes that AYWDN would bring both to my own life and for youth with disabilities in Kono and the country. Now, I will never look back. I will continue to challenge policies and work with my fellow campaigners to influence key decision-makers in Kono and Sierra Leone.”

The AYWDN-Sierra Leone network is gradually becoming more institutionalized and showing greater involvement with key stakeholders, such as the Commission on Disabilities, the Ministry of Education and the city councils (who are adapting and changing the way they traditionally viewed persons with disabilities in their society).

Jamesina King, Vice Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, collaborated with AYWDN to train at least 40 youth with disabilities on advocacy and campaigning skills. As King said during her keynote speech at the Network’s launch: “I have no doubt that this network and all of its members – the dynamic and talented young men and women around the country – are equipped and stand ready for sustained advocacy to ensure that policies, programs, laws, institutions and even the Constitutional Review include and take into account the needs and interests of youths with disabilities, and that their voices are heard.”

Training of young persons living with disabilities in Sierra Leone.
When it comes to defending the rights of youth and children in Senegal, there are two major issues that persist: the exorbitant number of children living on the streets and the lack of effective restorative justice mechanisms to help minors in conflict with the law post-incarceration.

The street children and “talibe” issue is estimated to encompass more than 50,000 young boys living in Senegal. Many of these youth, the majority under 12 and some as young as four, are drawn to Senegal either by force or by their own will (runaways) from neighboring countries and end up in “daaras” (koranic schools). While the government has time and again made attempts to solve what could effectively be deemed a social “crisis” – either through the banning of begging entirely or the clamping down on charlatan “marabouts” (fake spiritual leaders of Islam) who abusively force their young disciples to beg for rice, sugar and money - the issue has had little success in abating.

Parallel to the talibe problem is how incarcerated minors are treated behind closed doors, including how poorly their basic needs (food and sanitation) are accounted for, through to how they are educated and prepared for their eventual social reintegration. Prisoners often face particular difficulties from a societal perspective, both during and post-incarceration. This can be especially damaging for youth, who have their whole lives in front of them and may not ever “recover” from the heavy social stigma that falls on them once having served time “behind bars”.

To help address both the issue of talibes and incarcerated minors, the Thies-based NGO Association pour le sourire d’un enfant (SUE) began a program that promotes child and youth rights by ensuring alternative education and creating stronger synergies between key actors in the areas of justice, religion and civil society. Between January 1 and July 31, 2014 the organization reached nearly 6,000 talibes, street children and minors in conflict with the law. For the street children, they offered literacy and sports activities through their daily “school bus” classes, in addition to a food distribution and agricultural program to help draw kids away from the street. For the incarcerated minors, they helped put in place a health clinic at the prison, and ensured a daily educational program that includes literacy and sports classes. They also helped provide judicial aid assistance for nearly 120 young detainees and guaranteed one out of every two prisoners had at least a primary level of schooling.

The SUE project is also working on a unique initiative that uses fencing as a socio-educational activity to build self-confidence, sense of self and respect for others. Street children partake once a week, while incarcerated youth (male and female who are serving three years or longer) attend twice a week. Special classes targeting SUE educators and penitentiary agents are also offered, which allows them to also participate and learn from this innovative approach to restorative justice.

Two boys learn fencing as part of a restorative justice project. Minors in conflict with the law participate in bi-weekly sessions. The young boys (and girls) are taught various fencing techniques as a way to help build discipline, self-control and trust. Here’s what some fencing participants had to say:

“Psychologically, the fencing helps me get peace and concentration,” explains one 18-year-old male who is serving a sentence for infanticide.

“Fencing makes me forget I am in prison. I can just come here, forget all my troubles and play,” says a 16-year-old female.

“As a result of these (fencing) sessions, the penitentiary workers have been able to gain the trust of the minors, creating a space that allows them to open up and tell them their personal stories. It also teaches the youth about honesty,” says one fencing trainer.

“Fencing can play a huge role in calming kids and teaching them how to accept defeat,” explains a psychologist working on the SUE program. A feature-length documentary is currently being made on how fencing is used as restorative justice in Senegal’s penitentiary system.
Promoting disability rights at Ghana's District Assembly Level

Ghana Society of the Physically Disabled (GSPD)

In 1989, as part of Ghana's government effort to decentralize power, fight deprivity and ensure greater political participation from all sectors of society, a district level system of governance was put in place. Whipsawed into action, 170 districts has, in the last 25 years, grown to 170. These measures have helped improve political participation among Ghanaians (including among women who represent a relatively high number of voters), which is essential in creating accountable governments and delivering on relevant local development policies. However, when it comes to persons living with disabilities (PWDs), who make up an estimated 5,180 million people (20% of Ghana's population), they are still kept at arm's length from any meaningful involvement in politics. This exclusion can partly be attributed to discrimination, negative social perception owing to cultural prejudice and low economic status. Helping bridge the gap between PWDs and ensuring their active participation in the political realm requires enhancing their access to local governance, and more specifically to District Assembly Governance systems. According to the Ghana Federation of the Disabled, PWDs are represented in less than 20 out of the 170 districts (or some 25 out of the total 7650 members of the district and municipal assemblies). This means that PWDs are effectively kept out of the development planning, implementation and monitoring processes at the local level.

Since 1980, the Ghana Society of the Physically Disabled (GSPD) has been promoting and protecting the rights of PWDs through advocacy, awareness raising, mobilization and livelihood support. In 2012, they began a one-year project to help push for the realization of the rights of PWDs to participation (as stipulated in the 2006 Persons with Disabilities Act), to better self-advocate and to build the required skills to effectively vie for political positions in local government. They started the project with a call for input submissions from the disability movement within the district assemblies. They also set up a committee comprised of national disability network members who reviewed the legislative terms of the Disability Act and drafted a policy position. Through this project, GSPD has successfully trained 20 PWDs (many of whom are currently district assembly members), 25 aspiring members and 30 PWD leaders from six districts on the political decentralization system, campaigning methods and advocacy training.

Benjamin Amankwaah is an Assembly Member of Ohemaa Park in the New Juabeng District, Ghana's Eastern Region: “The project has completely changed my life. People think that because we are disabled, we cannot do anything useful in life, but because of you, we are now part of those who make decisions in our community. Because of my physical disability, people used to disrespect me, but I always knew that God had created me with something and I am now one of those people who commands respect in our community. I am only so glad for this. I will be standing for re-election in the upcoming local elections and I’m very confident that I will win because of the work I’ve been doing, especially for my disabled brothers and sisters.”

Transparency International (TI)

West Africa's youth tackle corruption

There are an estimated 340 million people living in West Africa, more than half of them under the age of 35. With such a rising demographic, it’s increasingly critical (and relevant) to tap into the youth population as key agents of change and instigators of development in the region. In West Africa, as much of the continent, corruption remains one of the most pressing and corrosive impediments, especially when it comes to economic and democratic affairs. Youth, however, can be a potent force in fighting against it. But to do so - to engage and mobilize the millions of young men and women - they must be inspired. Enhancing youth participation in the fight against corruption requires making them feel concerned and capable of combating the phenomenon, but it also requires allowing the space, creativity and means to do so.

In 2014, Transparency International (TI) whose work focuses on stemming corruption, embarked on a year-long project that would help catalyze a West African youth community in improving the quality of governance in local communities across Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal. They set up two main activities, a Youth Integrity Camp and a Social Entrepreneurs’ Initiative (SEI), that would expose youth to discussions and debates on accountability and integrity and motivate innovative minds to develop new methods, tools and projects to fight corruption. One of the main concerns raised at the onset of this project (and more generally in working with a foreign-based organization such as TI) was how it would involve and benefit the growth of local organizations. To help ensure the sustainability and transfer of skills beyond those select participants of the Youth Camps and SEI, and build a strong and viable youth community, the project took a two-pronged approach: directly by inviting participants to return to the camps to train other young people, and indirectly by producing communications material such as a website, social media pages and mailing lists that continue to promote and improve the engagement and awareness of young people in West Africa.

African youth community in improving the quality of governance in local communities across Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal. They set up two main activities, a Youth Integrity Camp and a Social Entrepreneurs’ Initiative (SEI), that would expose youth to discussions and debates on accountability and integrity and motivate innovative minds to develop new methods, tools and projects to fight corruption. One of the main concerns raised at the onset of this project (and more generally in working with a foreign-based organization such as TI) was how it would involve and benefit the growth of local organizations. To help ensure the sustainability and transfer of skills beyond those select participants of the Youth Camps and SEI, and build a strong and viable youth community, the project took a two-pronged approach: directly by inviting participants to return to the camps to train other young people, and indirectly by producing communications material such as a website, social media pages and mailing lists that continue to promote and improve the engagement and awareness of young people in West Africa.

The competition proved that young people from West Africa have great ideas to defeat corruption. Submissions showed deep understanding of how corruption affects young people's future and how they can be part of the solution,” said Transparency International Board Member Ruenbi Lufika, who served on the competition jury.
It suddenly got a whole lot easier to be a professional journalist in Benin. After a national press code was passed by parliament on January 23, 2015, media workers across the country are now able to carry out their work without fear of imprisonment.

This includes reporting on the President, which has historically been a subject privy to immunity through its “offense au president” (presidential offense) clause that safeguards how the head of state is presented in the press. This landmark event took place after three days of deliberation by parliament and over two years of lobbying by Benin’s Media Union (UPMB) and other media associations such as Conseil National de Patronat (CNPA) who worked with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Article 19, a human rights organization, to develop an advocacy strategy for the adoption of a code.

Benin has traditionally ranked as one of the top countries in Africa for press freedom and freedom of speech, which are both constitutionally protected. But in practice, and since President Boni Yayi took power in 2006, there have been numerous legal and regulatory restrictions imposed on media freedom.

In the reformed press code, the Media Associations led by UPMB made a list of suggestions that would professionalize and protect Benin’s media. These include a specific section on freedom of information, which should pave the way for a comprehensive freedom of information law in the country. The general provision to continue to imprison journalists for what they publish, which was in the original draft sent by the government to parliament, was removed. There is now only one circumstance under the law for which journalists may be imprisoned: if their work leads to damage of public property. For any other offences, journalists will only face financial penalties if found guilty.

“At least now Benin can be proud to say that, in terms of information and communication, we have a code,” said Koffi Benoit, a Beninese photojournalist. “And this is a code that calls for more accountability and that encourages responsibility... Every person who now wants to do this type of work has to do so with a good conscience.”

The passage of Benin's press code is a great victory for press freedom in the country, but is also one that can be shared by all journalists across West Africa. It sets a new precedent which is hoped will be emulated by other countries in the region and beyond.
The peace, stability and well-being of citizens are partly dependent on an effective management of natural resources and public resources in West Africa. A major impediment to this development is the thick veil of secrecy that shrouds much of the management of natural and public resources. The entire contracting process is foreign to most people in the region. The clauses, conditions and prerogatives in these contracts are also often unknown or misunderstood by the public. That is a fertile environment for corrupt practices to flourish. Egregious cases of abuses or mismanagement, as well as strife on and around mining sites, are also not widely understood. Government’s spending and corruption, especially in public procurement through which most states spend their budgets, is often under-reported.

Herein lies the invaluable role of the media. Often referred to as the “Fourth Estate,” the press in West Africa, as in any other part of the world is a key accountability tool. A free, independent, plural and vibrant media ecosystem is one that informs, fosters agency, and promotes democracy as a whole. In West Africa, the media is also particularly well-placed to act as a counter-power, serving an indispensable “checking function” on government to ensure as much transparency and accountability on “promises made and promises kept”.

While it is growing more robust, the West African media ecosystem is still fragmented and relatively ill-equipped to investigate and follow-up on opaque financial and economic issues. This may be due to lack of capacity, technological know-how or sheer difficulty in accessing critical information or data, and in some cases, only a recent focus on journalistic investigations. But the result is often the same. Although a great deal of progress has been made, media coverage of critical issues relating to mining contracts and tracking of state expenditures is not yet robust enough. This leaves citizens less equipped to be agents of political and social pressure, because they simply lack access to the information.

Investigating natural resources in West Africa can be a dangerous business. Safeguarding the risks to the lives of media workers must be paramount. The African Network of Centers for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR), a voluntary association of investigative newsrooms modeled and adapted from the American Investigative News Network (INN) has been steadily staking its ground as a comprehensive mapping of fiscal jurisdiction of oil and gas sectors in Nigeria, and corruption in the public procurement of medicines. They also helped launch the Afrileaks portal that enables whistleblowers to safely leak information through an encrypted platform. Additionally, they launched a comprehensive mapping of fiscal jurisdiction of oil companies in Nigeria.

The production of informative and qualitative research is at the core of ANCIR’s work. But the organization further recognizes that in order to sustainably support the media ecosystem in the region, they must also address structural issues of training and mentoring new journalists, providing technical support (such aspects as cybersecurity in Ghana and Nigeria, ethics, forensic investigations and cross-examination) and the legal protection of journalists. Ensuring the security of journalists and social pressure, because they simply lack access to the information.

ANCIR’s core pillars - investigative capacity training, specialized investigative tools and investigative content - led the organization to pursue a joint project on socio-economic investigations probing the illicit and illegal activities of West African oil and gold industries, as well as health, labor, environmental and other small grant investigations. They worked with a dozen investigative journalists (including freelance journalists) over the course of a year to pursue in-depth reports, including on the Ponzi Schemes in Sierra Leone, tax evasion in the oil and gas sectors in Nigeria, and corruption in the public procurement of medicines. They also helped launch the Afrileaks portal that enables whistleblowers to safely leak information through an encrypted platform. Additionally, they launched a comprehensive mapping of fiscal jurisdiction of oil companies in Nigeria.

Finally, given the growing population of West Africa and the tremendous youth bulge, news consumption patterns are changing radically. iLabs has been supporting disruptive technology in newsrooms by embedding developers, journalists and communications personnel to drastically rethink how news and information can be packaged to reach a critical mass of people – notably the youth – but also people outside urban centers or with limited reading capacity.

African Network of Centers for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR)

What lies beneath: journalists delve for the truth

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The Brekete Reality Program (BRRP) is an innovative journalistic venture in Nigeria that was created in 1999 as a groundbreaking citizen's radio platform. Over the years, they have become a fearless and vocal group addressing tough and sensitive governance issues and providing advice and assistance to citizens caught up in their State's excesses or neglect. It is something of a "clearing house for citizen's complaints," airing across five states in the northcentral and northwestern zones. It has over 200 million listeners locally and links up the plaintiffs with relevant government agencies. Since they began over 15 years ago, they have received over 50 million complaints from SMS, letters and phone calls. Some of these complaints were successfully handled, and the program's producer has himself been arrested by the government over 30 times. The one-hour long program receives more than 40 letters, 1000 SMSs and 1000 phone calls every day.

Brekete Family has become a Mecca of sorts for ordinary Nigerians in distress, especially those from the northern part of the country. They provide an avenue to be heard and hold agencies and organizations to account for gross misconduct or injustice. A blogger once wrote, "If more Nigerians fight so selflessly for the rights of the common man and a better Nigeria like this humble gentleman; that dream of a better Nigeria will surely become a reality!"

Over the last year, Brekete Family has positively affected the lives of thousands. An estimated 4335 cases have been treated by Brekete Family through daily discussions on the radio program, fair and effective mediation and through the courts system, usually employed as a last resort. These cases range from human rights violations, involving both government agencies and individuals – some of which are pending, others successfully resolved.

Ordinary Ahmad Isah, a man that has seen it all, at first sight hardly strikes you as a powerful man or a change agent in the context of modern day Nigeria. You would be excused if you did not give him a second look passing in the hallway. But big surprises come in small packages! Beneath his slight frame, harmless looks and soft-spoken manners lies a brave-heart that breaks walls and ceilings as he transforms into a crusader with fire in his eyes.

OSIWAs Nigeria Country Office Manager, Udo Jude Ilo, recalls some thoughts on one particular Brekete Family episode: "...And so on my morning drive to work, once again the program fails to disappoint. The issue before the Brekete panel this morning is the story of a man who was wrongfully dismissed from his job at a government agency for clearly unsubstantiated reasons. Years of approved allowances were still owed and the man had exhausted his meagre savings trying to get the agency in question to pay what was rightfully owed. His story is quite sad and it further epitomizes the frustrated man ready to give up on life."

"Brekete Family's host, Ordinary Ahmed, quickly calls the head of this government agency to get his side of the story. When the top official gets on the phone, and just moments after Ordinary Ahmed introduces the issue, the man hangs up. All other attempts to call him back prove unsuccessful. Obviously, the man is not keen on having this particular conversation. But now the fun part: the official's telephone numbers are announced on air and Nigerians are invited to text and call him until the issue is resolved."

"On my way to work the following day, the government official is now on-air providing a public apology to all Nigerians. Apparently his phone has been ringing off the hook. The bombardment of messages nearly caused his phone to breakdown. Suffice it to say, the case of the plaintiff's overdue entitlements was resolved within weeks."

"Perhaps the biggest value that BRRP has added to anti-impunity work in Nigeria is establishing a rallying platform for OSIWA's grantees, and indeed many NGOs, seeking to engage with Nigerians, educate them on various issues and field questions on issues such as open government and public procurement. These are issues that, ordinarily, the average man on the street may never grasp."

Abdul Tejan-Cole (L), OSIWA Executive Director, & Mikang Lijang (R), Program Coordinator in Nigeria, in the Brekete Family studios.
Strengthening and equipping West Africa’s CSO’s to address social challenges

The efforts of the West African Civil Society Institute (WACSI) continue to make headway as they empower civil society organizations (CSOs) to be effective, efficient and adequately respond to the numerous challenges facing West Africans. The organization does this by equipping CSOs with tools and strategies to be more effective in delivering on their mandate. It’s no secret that West Africa has long faced several hurdles. But this past year, these challenges were exacerbated by the unexpected and deadly resurgence of Ebola that ravaged throughout Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

One of WACSI’s key beneficiaries in Liberia, the National Youth Movement for Transparent Elections (NAYMOTE), who have been working since 2001 to help advance democracy in the country, played an instrumental role in countering this epidemic. After 11 NAYMOTE staff and volunteers participated in a WACSI training on Communication Skills and Strategies organized in May 2014 (just over two months after the Ebola outbreak in Guinea), the CSO was able to overcome a significant challenge they faced for the preceding 13 years: an inability to effectively communicate with its stakeholders.

“NAYMOTE has done a lot of work, but has not been able to effectively communicate with its different stakeholders,” explained Eddie Jarwolo, NAYMOTE’s Executive Director, post-WACSI training. “The organization can now communicate with them in a clear, effective and in a timely fashion.”

In large part, thanks to this five-day training, NAYMOTE staff carefully identified their stakeholders, and the specific communication tools and messages the organization could use to reach out to them. This enabled NAYMOTE to develop a communications strategy that provides a feasible roadmap for delivering key messages to its stakeholders. Key messages such as “It is your right to vote” were crafted to drive the organization’s campaign to motivate more Liberian youth to fully participate in electoral processes in the country. Beyond creating their first ever organizational communications strategy, NAYMOTE staff also learned how to responsibly communicate on the issue of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in Liberia. For example, through an Ebola Awareness Call Center (a project inspired by the organization’s enhanced communications plan) NAYMOTE effectively reached over 4,125 citizens across all 15 counties, which helped educate on the signs and symptoms of Ebola and how to avoid EVD infection.

“Thanks to the training, we learned to identify and effectively communicate with our stakeholders, especially the youth,” said Aaron Weah, NAYMOTE’s Program Director. We did this by identifying all the young persons in our database, then calling them directly and educating them on the virus. It was very effective and resulted in an enhanced visibility of NAYMOTE itself.”

The Ebola Awareness Call Center was effective because “it educated and informed Liberians from across the country about Ebola prevention and control. More than 500 persons who called for tips on how to handle Ebola emergencies in their communities were saved,” added Vanessa Davies, Programs Associate at NAYMOTE.

WACSI’s work on strengthening the capacities of CSOs has benefitted nearly 200 practitioners from over 145 African CSOs, including NAYMOTE. In addition to Liberia, CSOs from Mali, Burkina Faso, The Gambia, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Niger and (for the first time ever) South Sudan were all strengthened through WACSI’s targeted initiatives. These included capacity-building programs, advocacy engagements to promote an enabling environment for CSOs and research projects to identify the capacity gaps within CSOs in the region.

The types of CSO capacity challenges that WACSI addresses are enormous. Most of these are identified through targeted research conducted within the civil society sector. A research project was commissioned by the Institute and CIVICUS, an international alliance dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world. It used the Civil Society Rapid Index Assessment and exposed some of these difficulties experienced by CSOs in Benin, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal.

In Benin, for example, the report exposed a lack of technical skills, poor governance, problems of leadership, staff turnover, conflicts of jurisdiction between bodies and the non-specialization of CSOs as some of the main internal factors impeding their effectiveness.

In Ghana, among the four main challenges facing CSOs is the lack of skills for staff to carry out their functions. WACSI’s efforts will undoubtedly continue to be relevant to the effective development of the region, and even to the continent’s CSOs for some time yet to come.
When Ebola was first reported in Guinea in December 2013, the West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR), through its team of journalists and producers in Dakar and its correspondents on the ground in Conakry, was one of the only sub-regional media outlets to provide daily reports on this deadly epidemic. Over the next few weeks, their coverage in Guinea was intensified as more emphasis was placed on analyses with experts on the ground, such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Doctors Without Borders. They provided thoughtful insight on the nature of the virus, the victims and the threats it posed to the entire sub-region.

When Ebola crossed into neighboring Sierra Leone and then Liberia in March 2014, WADR launched a more robust reporting campaign. Through their special correspondent, who travelled to both Sierra Leone and Liberia, and their team of local correspondents, WADR visited different isolation units (treatment centers) in both countries, getting firsthand reports on the state of Ebola victims. They also allowed those affected to tell their own stories. This included reports from healthcare staff on the frontlines risking their lives every day to save the lives of others. At the time, this was nearly unprecedented, especially by local media.

As one Red Cross Ebola volunteer working at the Kenema Treatment Center in Sierra Leone said, “Everybody is running away from me just because I work at an Ebola treatment center. I’m a Muslim and when I go to the mosque to pray, everybody leaves the mosque because they said I’d transfer Ebola to them. But I’ll stay on and fight Ebola.”

At the time, few media outlets were providing this kind of Ebola depth and breadth in their coverage. And yet WADR still went further. They not only covered the stories of death and survival, but also the reintegration process for Ebola survivors when they returned to their communities after being discharged.

“Ebola is not good. I’m happy to be back with my family and my advice to people is that if they suspect having Ebola they have to rush to health facilities,” explained a young Sierra Leonean Ebola survivor after being reintegrated into her community.

As well as covering the loss of lives, WADR provided in-depth reporting on the loss of livelihoods. Through their special correspondent, who travelled to both Sierra Leone and Liberia, they reported daily during an October 2014 mission when WADR senior producer Sheriff Bojang Junior reported on how the virus affected employment, tourism, foreign business and the economy. They also covered how Ebola was affecting the social fabric of both countries, creating an atmosphere of panic, confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, hopelessness and pandemonium.

To help monitor the national and international Ebola response on the ground, WADR carried out a series of interviews with officials. These included policymakers and experts who spoke on issues such as the management of the Ebola response, what was working and what was not, how Ebola funds were used and lessons learned from the epidemic.

Through WADR’s intensive and consistent coverage of Ebola, including its focus on survivors, WADR helped inspire and motivate people in a time of hopelessness. They helped overturn many commonly-held beliefs, such as the misnomer that contracting Ebola automatically meant death. By providing clear, consistent and accurate information, WADR was able to help sensitize on preventative and treatment options, such as seeking timely medical care.

WADR was also instrumental in enabling people in non-affected countries to connect with those in affected ones. This allowed citizens and officials in the former to better prepare and protect themselves.

As one Sierra Leonean candidly explained in a WADR interview, “We were told that when you have Ebola, you die. But if you say there are more survivors than dead people, then I believe the initial perception of everybody dying isn’t true.”
Helping build open societies in West Africa is, and will continue to be, a work in progress. As these stories have shown, we are invested in a multitude of endeavors – from justice and human rights, governance and accountability, to media and minority rights. Each one of these projects (and many that are not laid out in these pages) seek in their own and complementary ways to help lay the stones of foundation in creating a freer, fairer, safer and more equitable West Africa.

Along the way we know, and we expect, to be confronted by the unexpected. There will continue to be political upheavals for some time to come as old leaders step down and new ones rise up. Social unrest is bound to persist as populations lay claim to their rights. And as the Ebola epidemic highlighted all too well, the potential for emergency epidemics remains a very real and very deadly threat.

We need to be ready and we need to be flexible. Whatever the context, we are also cognizant that in our work good results and positive impact are the outcomes of effective planning – not mere chance. Understanding local realities, identifying influencing factors and assessing the availability of resources are key prior steps before supporting initiatives and expecting sustainable and impactful change.

OSIWA’s goal is to ally with partners and projects that aspire to lasting effects, while also being catalysts for changes in behavior, habits or context. To do this, we are rigorous in the review of each proposal and we try to be thorough throughout the entire monitoring and evaluation process.

To also value the joint effort between the Foundation and partner, we try to establish direct contact with each organization as much as possible. We also seek regular exchanges to understand the particular dynamics of each project. We understand that bringing about change is never a solitary nor one dimensional venture.

And while some of the partnerships are new and others are older, we all share one common and overarching goal: the vision and faith in the construction of a freer West Africa that is more integrated, more democratic and more equitable for both the current and future generations to come. And for us, this is the driving force that keeps us moving forward.